

## A Lesson on Salvation

(“Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise”)

(Luke 23:39-43)

John Gordon was a respected general for the South during the Civil War. After the war, he was running for the U.S. Senate, but a man who had served under him in the war, angry over some political incident, was determined to see him defeated. During the convention he angrily stamped down the aisle with his anti-Gordon vote in hand. As he saw Gordon sitting on the platform, he noticed how his once handsome face was disfigured with the scars of battle.

Overcome with emotion, he exclaimed, “It’s no use; I can’t do it. Here’s my vote for John Gordon.” Then, turning to the general, he said, “Forgive me, General. I had forgotten the scars.”

If your love for the Lord has grown cold, I encourage you to go back to the cross and remember the scars, not just the physical wounds and scars of Jesus, but the scars of God’s wrath that Jesus bore in your place. Christ’s amazing love as expressed on the cross can turn your heart from sin and give you a new zeal and devotion to serve Him.



The text we are studying pertains to salvation is Luke 23:39-43. It’s a scene that occurs in relation to Jesus hanging on the cross. While hanging on the cross Christ was evangelizing two thieves. The Savior was seeking the lost even while He suffered on the cross. The Bible reveals that there were two other men hanging on crosses. One was on the right of Jesus and the other on the left.

Luke 23:33 records:

“And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors (*thieves or thugs*), one on the right hand, and the other on the left.”

Luke 23:39-43 explains what happened:

“And one of the malefactors (*evildoers, thieves, criminals*) which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

As I read these verses I must arrive at the conclusion that there is a Heaven and Hell and there is also the need to be saved from Hell and eternal damnation. In fact, for every one-time Jesus spoke about Heaven, He spoke three times about Hell. As I read this text, I must come to the simple conclusion that the unsaved go to Hell and the saved go to dwell with Jesus after death. There is nothing in between these two eternal destinations – no purgatory, limbo, out-of-body experiences, no other explanations, no other possibilities, and no other findings.

What about the two thieves? There was one on the right and the other on the left. I think it was providential that Jesus was crucified *between* the two thieves, for this gave both of them equal access to the Savior. God did not elect the one to Heaven and the other to Hell! The cross stood between them and they both had opportunity to be saved. Both could read Pilate’s superscription, “This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38) and both could watch Him as He graciously gave His life for the sins of the world. Someone asked me if I believe in death-bed conversions. Yes, I do. What about the thief on the cross? Jesus forgave one man, and this man went to paradise (the place of comfort and blessing). The other went to hades (the place of fire, torment, judgment, and agony). The message of this Biblical narrative is this. You can still win on your death bed! So this is a lesson on salvation.

Salvation is every person’s greatest need.

This scene on the cross reveals four realities related to salvation.

### **1. The peril of unbelief**

“And one of the malefactors (a person who commits a crime, a thief) which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us.”

The one thief speaks to Jesus as an unbeliever. His remarks reveal his unbelief in Christ to be his Savior.

In breaking down this first point we notice several things.

- a. Unbelievers reject Christ as the way of salvation.

Notice the unbelief and doubt in this man's response – "if thou be Christ" (Luke 23:39). This man did not believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, Deliverer, and Savior, the One who could bring his soul to paradise and save his soul from Hell. This is the peril of all unbelief! It says "No" to Jesus Christ and His salvation and deliverance. And in the end – unbelief leads to an everlasting Hell.

The reason why people die and go to Hell is because they reject Christ as the Son of God and Savior of mankind.

Jesus taught in John 3:36:

"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

Folks, it's impossible to escape Hell and damnation if you don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Savior.

Hebrews 2:3

"How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard *him*."

In other words, it's impossible to escape God's wrath and judgment if we neglect the importance of being saved.

Matthew 23:33

"Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

Salvation does not mean, as a past popular TV preacher put it, "to be changed from a negative to a positive self-image" (Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* [Word], p. 68). Salvation does not mean that Jesus helps you fulfill your dreams. Salvation is not about Jesus improving your marriage or giving you

peace and joy. God's salvation isn't a nice thing to give you a successful and happy life. Salvation is about Jesus rescuing you from the wrath to come! This means that salvation is every person's greatest need!

In Luke 23:40 the thief said:

"Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?"

Essentially, he was saying, "Buddy, we can't talk ourselves out of this one. We are going somewhere today. We are going to be judged for our sins in Hell. We cannot wiggle out of this." This is true for Jesus taught in John 3:18, "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

If you reject WHO Jesus Christ is (the Son of God) and WHAT Christ has done (paying the penalty for your sins on the cross), then you are going to end up in judgment. You cannot escape the reality of this! You cannot escape Hell when you refuse to believe on the Son of God and His saving work.

A young man was converted during special evangelistic meetings held in a mining village. Wanting to do something for God, he bought some tracts and was distributing them one day, when he met some former companions. They decided to make fun of him for his faith in Christ. "Hey! Can you tell me where Hell is?" After a moment's hesitation, the newly converted man replied, "Yes, at the end of a Christless life."

b. Unbelievers misunderstand the true nature of salvation.

The words "save thyself and us" (vs. 39) demonstrate that this man did not understand the true nature of salvation. We observe from this statement that this particular man wanted to be saved physically but not spiritually! He wanted to be removed from the cross he was attached to and be saved from his physical calamity – not the spiritual calamity that awaited him for rejecting Christ. Unbelief and Satan's blindness clouds the judgment of people. They have a wrong concept of salvation altogether. They attribute salvation to physical deliverance – not spiritual deliverance.

Lehman Strauss shared how he met a woman one day who said she was saved three times. He was very interested in hearing about this. The woman said that she was saved from dying in a car accident, saved from dying of cancer, and saved from a ferocious dog. Of course, this is a wrong understanding about the true nature of salvation. Salvation does not refer to salvation from our earthly calamities but a spiritual salvation from the eternal judgement of Hell. A person cannot be saved unless they understand or comprehend that they are a sinner that needs to be saved from a spiritual death or separation from God in Hell and that salvation or deliverance can only come through Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection.

1 Timothy 2:4 reveals:

"Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

We see from this verse that God desires all people to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9). It indicates that man cannot save himself but must be saved by God. This verse is not teaching that all people will be saved (universalism) but that God's desire that they might be saved. We also understand from this verse that a person must come to understand and then receive the truth if they are going to be saved. The veil must be taken off their eyes and light must shine into their minds and hearts.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4

"But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them."

Because of the spiritual blindness of Satan people need to come to the knowledge of the truth. They need some knowledge of what Scripture says about their sinfulness before God, their salvation through Christ alone, a salvation that is without works (good deeds). A person cannot properly believe or express faith in Christ until they have come to the knowledge of the truth of their own sinfulness before God, their need for deliverance, and how to be delivered through Jesus Christ. The truth must be presented to them, and the veil must be taken away from their eyes to be saved. This is what happened to the thief on the cross.

William MacDonald said:

"God does not save men against their will. He does not populate heaven with rebellious subjects. Man must come to Him who said: 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.' This is the human side."

The unbeliever on the one cross said, "If thou be the Christ." Folks, there are no "if's "ands" or "buts" about it. He is the Christ and if you reject Him as the Christ who came to deliver you from the penalty of sin and provide you with forgiveness, then you will go to Hell. You lose!

A preacher friend of mine was witnessing to a man who needed an operation. It was a very serious operation, one that he might not pull through. The preacher said, "If you by faith ask Christ to save you, you will win, but if you refuse to express faith in Christ to be your Saviour, you lose. The man went into the operation without believing on Christ. He did not survive the operation. So, in the end, he lost and will be lost forever in Hell.

Acts 16:31

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved."

## **2. The personal repentance of a sinner**

Luke 23:40-41

"But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss."

There are two radically different responses by these thieves. This reminds us that not all that come in contact with Christ respond favorably. Some are hardened by the very same message that softens others. This is because of Satan's blindness, the timing of God's working in the heart, and free will. They all enter into the picture when it comes to a person's salvation.

Do you know what happened to the one thief on the cross? The heart of the one thief was transformed by the power of God. This man has encountered Christ and it changed him forever. What happens to this one man is a textbook example of conversion.

The thief recognized his sinfulness and condemnation before God. These are the words of a repentant sinner. The one thief came to his senses. He possesses a sense that he was a SINNER when he asks, "does thou not fear God, seeing thou are in the same condemnation" (vs. 40) and realized his own fate: "we receive the due

reward of our deeds” (vs. 41). This thief knew he was going to a sinner’s Hell. But at the same time, he also realizes Jesus is the SAVIOR when saying, “this man hath done nothing amiss” (vs. 41) and when he concluded, “remember me” (verse 42). The mark of true repentance is that a person much change their mind and heart regarding the fact that they are a sinner before God, that salvation can only come through God’s grace, and the Jesus the Savior!

The mark of true repentance is that a person much change their mind and heart regarding the fact that they are a sinner before God, that salvation can only come through God’s grace, and the Jesus the Savior! Repentance has to do with taking sides with God. If you don’t repent, you don’t get saved! In fact, you can’t get to faith in Christ until you first repent of your sinfulness and depravity and see that Jesus Christ is the only way out!

There are some today in the evangelical world who are teaching that repentance is a form of good works and that faith alone is the way to respond to Christ. Let me say something about this way of thinking. No person can get to “faith alone” in Christ without repentance paving the way for faith to take place in his heart. The conversion response to God begins with repentance and moves to faith. Repentance, when rightly understood, has nothing to do with works. Repentance occurs when a sinner realizes that he has no good works to save himself and clings only to Christ for salvation.

H.A. Ironside one remarked:

“Repentance is not opposed to grace; it is the recognition of the need of grace. God is looking for broken men who have judged themselves in the light of the cross of Christ. When He wants anything done, He takes up men who have come to the end of themselves, whose confidence is not in themselves, but in God.”

Biblical repentance is the acknowledgment of one’s sinfulness before God and the need to receive salvation through Christ alone.

Jesus said in Luke 5:32

“I came not to call the righteous (the self-righteous), but sinners to repentance.”

There can be no true conversion without conviction that stems from repentance or a change of mind and heart regarding one’s sin, that a person needs salvation, and

the only way of salvation is through Jesus Christ. This thief on the cross evidenced true repentance and this is exactly what took place in his heart while hanging on the cross. “We receive our due reward” (vs. 41) means he was acknowledging that “I am a sinner deserving of death and judgment.”

Here is an interesting note. Matthew 27:44 and Mark 15:32 state that both robbers were casting insults at Jesus (“The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth”). Apparently they both found some kind of twisted satisfaction in mocking Jesus Christ while He hung on the cross. Luke alone mentions the conversion of the one robber. How do we reconcile these two accounts of the same scene?

It appears that at first both robbers railed against Jesus. Perhaps the second robber was wrongly led along by the first, even as he had been in his earlier life of crime. But as he watched Jesus’ demeanor on the cross, as he heard no curses or threats come out of Jesus’ mouth, as he heard Jesus pray for forgiveness for His persecutors (“Father forgive them” – Luke 23:34), he began to be convicted of his sin.

John Philipps said this about the one thief: “We do not know by what mysterious thought process He came to faith in Christ, against all the seeming, outward evidence, but come he did ... and he became the firstfruits of Calvary.”

It’s likely that the thief saw his own sin in contrast to Jesus’ clear innocence (“this man hath done nothing amiss” – vs. 41). Therefore, he stopped joining the other thief in mocking Jesus. The more he heard the other thief continue his blasphemous taunts, the more it bothered him. He finally spoke out in defense of Jesus, admitting his own guilt and repenting of his sin and need for salvation through Christ (Luke 23:40-41). He changes his mind about his sin and in doing so turned from his sin to the Savior. This is repentance. A repentant person stops blaming God and others for his own sins and admit his own guilt (“we receive the due reward of our deeds” – Luke 23:41). “I am a sinner and deserve to go to Hell.”

The repentant thief wasn’t blaming the system, his parents, or his environment. He admitted that he was getting what he deserved for his wrongdoing. Repentance means owning up to your sin. One of the most difficult sins to repent of is the sin of trusting in your own good works. However, to bring your own merit or good deeds before God is a mockery and affront on God, who gave His own Son as the



necessary satisfaction for His wrath against sin. Like this thief or robber every person must come to the same place of repentance, admitting that they justly deserve God's judgment for their sins and there is no way to be saved other than through Jesus.

### **3. The prayer of faith**

Luke 23:42

"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom."

True repentance always leads to faith in Christ. Repentance and faith work synergistically together. They are like the heads and tails on the coin. His words "remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" is a clear expression of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us remember that God knows the heart. When we talk to the Lord as a lost sinner, He hears us and saves us. Remember me! In these words, we see a simple expression of faith in Christ. "Jesus, I want to come into your kingdom someday when you establish it on the earth. I want to be with you on this coming day and live with you forever. Will you make that happen?"

The faith of this thief was heard by the Savior hanging on the cross and for this reason he was saved and is with the Lord Jesus Christ at this very moment. Now let's reflect on something. How much could this thief do to earn or merit eternal life? Nothing! This is because he was hanging on a cross! He could not clean up his life! He couldn't promise to do better in the future. He had no future! He had made a complete mess of his life. He did not say, "If I had it to do over, I would be a better person." He had nothing to argue, nothing to promise, nothing to bring to Christ as collateral for salvation. He simply asked for something he did not deserve, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" And, Jesus granted his request without any strings attached!

Let's reiterate this again. This thief could not do any good works (meritorious good deeds). He was hanging on a cross. This means he could not go to church, receive salvation by taking sacraments, by getting baptized, he could not get the priest for last rights, he could not promise that he would serve Jesus the rest of his life and make a legalistic contract with Jesus (Lordship Salvation). He could do any of these things!

In a simple and direct way, the thief exclaimed, “Lord, will you just remember me! Don’t remember my good deeds, my almsgiving, my church attendance. Just remember me, a poor lost sinner who is going to Hell unless you intervene and save me.”

Ephesians 2:8-9

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Here is the point. If you think that you have lived a good life and this will save you in the end, then you are not an inch closer to Heaven than the thief who had lived a wicked life. In fact, you may have more trouble trusting in Christ alone to be your Savior because your good works fill you with pride and self-righteousness. God’s salvation is always given in one way: by His free grace, totally apart from any human merit. It’s free and therefore no person can boast of their good deeds as it relates to salvation.

Romans 3:24

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:

Salvation is free! It’s free to receive without good works, almsgiving, without making promises to serve Jesus, without mastery/discipleship, without any human effort on man’s part. This is why the thief could only say: “Remember me!”

Salvation only comes to us through expressing simple faith in Christ. “Remember me! Don’t remember my sins, my terrible transgressions, my thievery, just remember me! Remember me! I’m a sinner that needs saving. Remember me! I’m lost and going to Hell. Remember me. I’m sinking and going down. My time is running out. I am going to die. Remember me. I want to live with your forever.”

You know, God has a good memory! He will not forget our expression of faith in the Son of God for salvation.

This is why Romans 10:13 says:

“For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

A sinner does not have to be a theologian to express saving faith in Jesus Christ, but he must know something about the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is not just a general or generic belief in God. It is not closing your eyes and taking a leap in the dark. Faith is not, "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows." Faith must be in the Jesus revealed in Scripture, not in the Jesus of a person's imagination. Faith must be in the Lord Jesus Christ who offered Himself in the place of sinners.

Jesus said in John 6:47:

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life."

A person must believe on Jesus Christ to receive everlasting life. But believing on Christ involves knowing that He came to die on the cross for you and rose from the dead. From a Gospel and New Testament perspective, a person must understand that Jesus died and rose again from the grave to give him eternal life (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The thief certainly knew Jesus was dying in his place and would rise again from the dead for he wanted to be with Christ in His future coming kingdom. Believing on Christ mean to express faith in His sacrificial death on the cross to save you. Believing on Christ means to express faith in the fact that He rose from the dead to give you everlasting life.

Romans 10:9

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Placing faith in Christ is personal and volitional which means we move our will and make a choice to receive the salvation Christ offers to us through His death and resurrection. We understand who Christ is, what He did for us, and then receive the free gift of salvation through Christ. Revelation 22:17 says, "And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." Faith is never a blind leap into the dark. Faith understands Christ died and rose again from the grave to grant a person salvation and eternal life and faith then receives the free gift and offer of deliverance.

In an article titled "How to Lead People to Christ: Part 1, The Content of Our Message," Zane Hodges states: "Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a

wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable. On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. But the only readable portions are: 'Jesus therefore answered and said to them' (v 43) and 'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life' (v 47).

"Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus' words in John 6:47. Is he saved? I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn't know enough. For example, he doesn't know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day." (Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ: Part 1, The Content of Our Message," *The Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13, Spring 2000: p. 4).

Hodges is making a theological blunder at this point in his teaching by claiming a person can be saved without knowing he is a sinner, without knowing he needs forgiveness through Christ, without knowing anything about Christ's death and resurrection, without knowing that the eternal future is Heaven and not some other kind of future related to the transmigration of the soul, karma, etc. The fact of the matter is this, no person can be saved who does not know and believe that Jesus died on the cross for them and rose from the dead. That is the Gospel! Hodges has created a Christless gospel in his vain reasoning (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Rom. 1:16; Eph. 1:13). Hodges seems to be reasoning that the Gospel can save a person without an individual knowing about the Gospel, knowing why he needs the Gospel, what the Gospel promises, and what is the future promise related to the Gospel. In other words, a person can take a blind leap into the dark and still be saved in the end.

Notice that Hodges says: "Let me begin with a strange scenario." I would say, "Let's begin with the Bible." Problems arise when strange scenarios begin to redefine or undermine the truth of God's Word causing confusion regarding the content of a saving faith, a faith that must know and believe in the Gospel facts of Christ's person and work. We know that it's grace that saves us through the vehicle of faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Saving faith means the kind of faith that is only centered upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, and which results in salvation. In other words, the sinner cannot claim the promise of eternal life without knowing who the Promiser is and why he needs the promise and where the promise leads to in the end. A promise without a foundation is useless and can never save anyone.

Every sinner must understand (“come unto the knowledge of the truth” - 1 Tim. 2:4) that Jesus died on the cross for them and rose again to grant them salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. What reason would anyone have in believing on Jesus Christ if there is no reason to believe on Jesus Christ! When believing on Christ the sinner realizes Jesus died in his place and upon believing he can be saved from Hell, receive the forgiveness of sins, and be made right before God. The Gospel would not be good news if you don’t know what the good news is all about!

We come now to our final point.

#### **4. The promise of Jesus**

Luke 23:43

“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

Today you will be in Paradise with me! At this time, prior to the resurrection, Paradise was within the center of the earth (Eph. 4:8). “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” When we come to the place of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, it’s then that we are given this wonderful promise. We will immediately dwell with Jesus Christ after our death and live forever with Him! This is God’s promise, and it is fully based upon His grace.

John 3:15

“That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

You will notice that Jesus said “Today.” When your time comes, you can be sure that you will be immediately ushered into the presence of Jesus Christ. Death can be viewed as a door that opens Heaven to every Gospel believer. Our departure into the presence of Jesus is immediate.

2 Corinthians 5:8 confirms this promise:

“We are confident, *I say*, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”

We won't be floating around in the universe somewhere after we die. We won't be having an "out-of-body" experience. We will be with Christ immediately and forever.

Philippians 1:23 adds this:

"For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better."

Immediately upon the departure of our spirit from our human body, we will be in the presence of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught, "Today you will be with me." This means we won't wait until the resurrection day to be with the Lord. Our soul does not sleep at the time of death. Today you will be with me. In a moment's time, after that last and final breath, we are with the Lord.

Someone said this about the thief on the cross:

"A thief picks the lock of grace and gets saved. When you play around with grace; you are just asking to get saved!"

This is exactly what happened during this scene at the cross. You can't twist this passage and make the text say something it does not say.

"The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day.  
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away."

Today you will be in paradise with me! Jesus did not prescribe a course of *penance* for this guilty man before he can enter paradise. Penance is based on human works, not God's free grace. Jesus promised the robber eternal life apart from anything the man did or promised to do. Jesus did not say, "You will be with me in paradise in 100 years, after the fires of purgatory burn off some of your sins." To hold to the doctrine of purgatory as being part of one's salvation is to deny the Gospel of God's grace as revealed in Scripture.

I don't want to be redundant, but I must remind you once again that the thief on the cross could not do anything to save his own soul. He was also nailed to a cross. Therefore, he could not perform any good deeds. He did not have any time to live

a good life, reform his life, and make improvements. He could only believe on the Son of God!

“Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling;  
Naked, come to thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.”

By his own admission, old Joe was not a religious man. He had never gone to church. He lived a pretty wild life. He drank too much, gambled a lot, swore without even thinking about it, and was not above lying and cheating when it was to his advantage. He thought that Christians were missing out on all the fun in life. He never thought much about God. Not until recently, that is.

Joe had retired and was looking forward to doing a lot of fishing. He had been having some stomach troubles. Probably too much beer, he thought. But then the doctor’s report came back: cancer. It had spread to several organs. There wasn’t much they could do. Joe might have six months to live, maybe less.

Joe had a nephew who was a Christian. One day his nephew’s pastor dropped by the hospital and began to talk to Joe about spiritual things. For the first time in his life, Joe listened with interest. What the pastor was saying seemed to make sense. It dawned on Joe that he had lived his whole life in a selfish, sinful manner. He knew that if he died, he would face God’s judgment. But the pastor said that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to pay the penalty that he deserved. He offered forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a free gift if Joe would receive it. Joe prayed to receive Christ. He died in peace shortly after, a deathbed conversion.

Whenever we hear stories like this, we should be glad and hopeful. But we might have the nagging question, “Was Joe’s conversion real?” Was he truly saved? Can a person live his entire life in sin, but get saved at the very last moment? Are deathbed conversions possible? Yes, the robber on the cross was saved just before he died. This particular scene and saying of the thief on the cross should calm our doubts and encourage us to share the Gospel with those on the brink of death, since the Bible includes a story of a genuine deathbed conversion.

I remember being called to witness to an Egyptian man who was on his deathbed. His heart was troubled, and he was scared to die. I presented the Gospel to him and asked if he wanted to express personal faith in Christ's death and resurrection to save him? His answer was, "Yes." I prayed and He prayed in his own heart expressing faith in Christ alone for salvation from hell and eternal life. When he opened his eyes he said to me, "Now I am at peace." He died the next day. Yes, he had a deathbed conversion.

This reminds us that the grace of God's salvation is offered up to the end if people want to receive it. But don't think you will have a chance to be saved just before you die. Many times, death catches people off guard and they enter eternity without Christ. They die the way they have lived – unsaved!

Hebrews 9:27

"And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."

A wise Puritan wrote this about the thief on the cross:

"We have one account of a deathbed repentance in order that no man need despair; we have only one, in order that no man may presume."

In other words, we should not presume upon God's grace and think we will have the chance to be saved at the last moment of our lives. Yes, we should share Christ with those who are on their deathbeds, praying that they might be saved. However, we should also warn people to not put off repentance and faith in Christ for another time. This is because they may not have another opportunity to be saved!

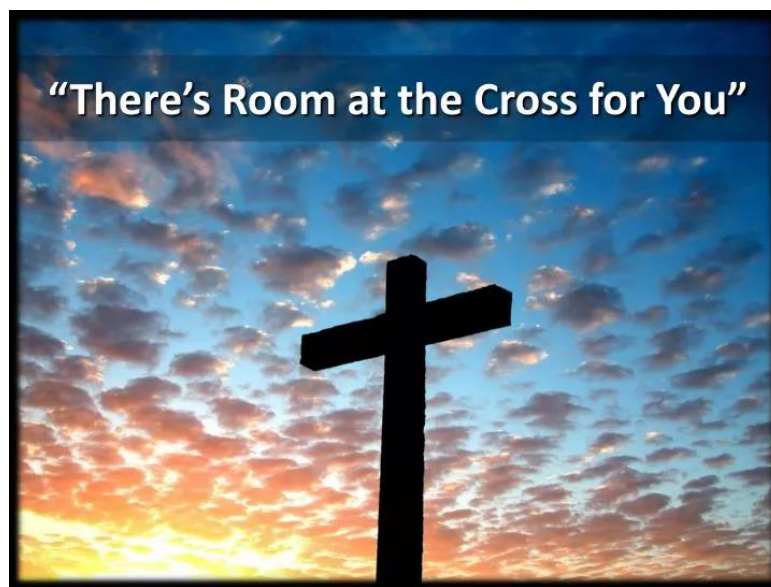
In this saying on the cross ("To day shalt thou be with me in paradise"), the plan of salvation is clearly revealed. The way of salvation is clearly seen. If you want to be saved, you can be saved, all because Jesus died on the cross, taking the judgment for your sin, your judgment, so you might escape Hell.

Luke 23:33

"And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left."



Which side of the cross are you on? One thief on the side of the cross died and went to Hell, the other thief on the other side of the cross died and want to be with Jesus. If you go to Hell, you will have to reject the cross, the grace of God, Jesus Christ, and His wonderful promise of everlasting life. As I conclude this study, all I can say is this: there is a Hell, don't go there, Jesus saves! Let Him save you today. The thief was hanging beside the cross of Jesus Christ. In a similar way, you must come to the cross if you want to be saved. You must see Jesus suffering and dying in your place and place your faith in His sacrifice to save you. Friend, there's still room for you at the cross. Have you ever come to the cross to express faith in Christ? If not, do so today for there's room at the cross for you!



“The cross upon which Jesus died,  
Is a shelter in which we can hide,  
And its grace so free is sufficient for me,  
And deep is its fountain as wide as the sea.  
There's room at the cross for you,  
There's room at the cross for you,  
Though millions have come, there's still room for one,  
Yes there's room at the cross for you.”